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U.S. General Land Office

Report on reduction of area of homesteads in...

[Washington]

[1915]

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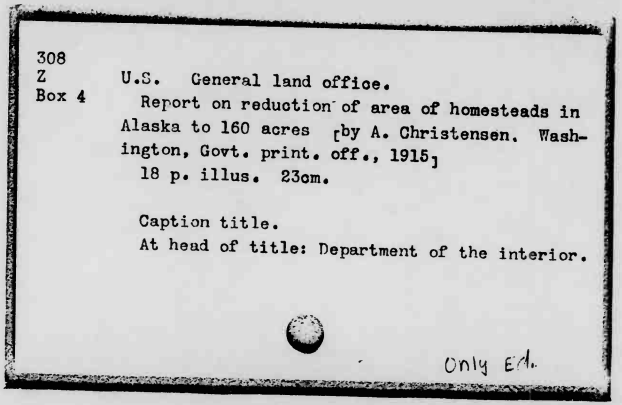

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U.S. General land office.
Report on reduction of area of homesteads in Alaska to 160 acres [by A. Christensen. Washington, Govt. print. off., 1915]
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DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR.

REPORT ON REDUCTION OF AREA OF HOMESTEADS IN ALASKA TO 160 ACRES.

DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR,
GENERAL LAND OFFICE,
Juneau, Alaska, January 16, 1915.

Hon. CLAY TALLMAN,
Commissioner General Land Office,
Washington, D. C.

MY DEAR MR. TALLMAN: When you were in Seattle during the first part of last October I suggested to you the advisability of urging Congress to change the homestead laws applicable to Alaska so as to reduce the area from 320 to 160 acres. I stated that I had been instrumental in having Commissioner Edes, chairman of the Alaskan Engineering Commission, wire the Secretary from Ship Creek, urging the passage of such a law. During my trip in Alaska during the past summer I took views of a number of homesteads in the Tanana Valley and in the Susitna Valley, for the purpose of showing to you and the Secretary the exact conditions on the ground and the need of an immediate change in the law.

I have heretofore urged this matter to your office in several letters and especially in my letter to you of July 10, 1913, on the entire Alaskan situation, and also in subsequent correspondence on H. R. 13487, introduced by Delegate Wickersham. I have also urged other changes in the homestead law, some of which are embodied in the bill. The provision requiring the reduction of the area to 160 acres is also included in the bill, but from present reports there appears to be little chance of it passing at this session of Congress, and I am writing you now with a view to urging upon you the necessity of immediate action.

I attach herewith a number of pictures taken by me during the summer showing exact conditions. I believe that they show more fully than I can express the need for immediate action. You can readily see that it will be impossible for the homesteaders to comply with the requirements of the homestead law as to cultivation when they are allowed to take 320 acres. I have heretofore advised your office that, as a general rule, land suitable for cultivation in Alaska is located in valleys in limited areas and that it does not take a great

many homesteads of 320-acre tracts to take up all available land in each valley, and, as it is impossible for them to cultivate more than a few acres, it will result in tying up the balance of the land in each entry for many years to come. If the area was cut down, it would permit many more homesteaders to go into the Territory and thereby develop the country much sooner and provide business for the proposed Government railroad. Everyone in Alaska with whom I talked were in favor of the reduction of the area. There was only one man with whom I talked who was in favor of 320 acres and his reason for it was that he had nine children, the oldest of whom was 15 years of age. He said that by the time his children grow up all the homestead land would be taken and he thought he should be allowed to take 320 acres to provide land for his children.

I will not take any more of your time in presenting this matter to you; the pictures speak for themselves. I hope that this may be brought to the attention of the Secretary and Congress, otherwise an irreparable injury will be done to the agricultural possibilities of the Territory.

Very respectfully,

A. CHRISTENSEN,
Chief of Field Division.

FIG. 1.—Ranch of William Young, near Fairbanks.

FIG. 2.—Barn at William Young's ranch; 3-year-old bull.

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FIG. 1.—Ranch of William Young, near Fairbanks.

FIG. 2.—Barn at William Young's ranch; 3-year-old bull.

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FIG. 3.—Oat field of William Young.

FIG. 4.—Another view of William Young's ranch.

FIG. 5.—William Young's ranch; note the height of the barley.

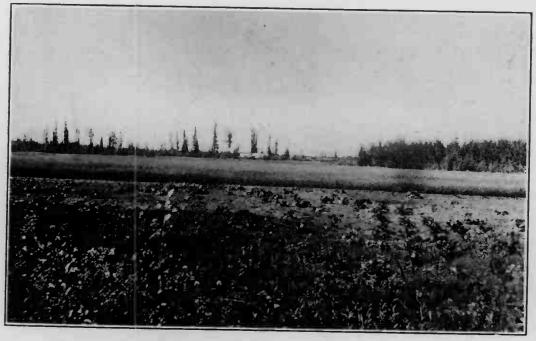

FIG. 6.—Garden and oat field of O. K. Newcomb, Tanana Valley.

FIG. 3.—Oat field of William Young.

FIG. 4.—Another view of William Young's ranch.

FIG. 5.—William Young's ranch; note the height of the barley.

FIG. 6.—Garden and oat field of O. K. Newcomb, Tanana Valley.

FIG. 7.—Ranch of Mill Sabin, Tanana Valley, about 3 miles from Fairbanks.

FIG. 8.—Part of Mill Sabin's crops, including turnips, potatoes, and oats. He has spent $9,000 in improving his farm. Sabin runs a livery barn in Fairbanks and has taken the profits and invested them in his farm. He has approximately 40 acres under cultivation, and it cost him from $35 to $40 per acre to clear the land.

FIG. 9.—Looking down the Tanana Valley from the ranch of L. J. Erickson. Erickson has 7 or 8 acres under cultivation, has 2 horses, 2 cows, 7 head of hogs, and 80 chickens. During the summer he receives $1 per dozen for eggs and during the winter from $2 to $2.50 per dozen.

At the time I was there he had a hired man whom he was paying $125 per month and board. In this section of the Territory they pay from $125 to $150 per month and board to the hired men.

Native hay brings from $60 to $80 per ton. Most of the hay is cut with a scythe, among the trees where there happens to be a cleared space. They say a man in good weather can put up about 2 tons per week.

FIG. 10.—Farm of Magnus Nelson. At the time of my visit Mr. Nelson employed a hired man whom he was paying $4 per day and board. He did not have a very large area cultivated, but his hired man was putting up hay for him.

FIG. 7.—Ranch of Mill Sabin, Tanana Valley, about 3 miles from Fairbanks.

FIG. 8.—Part of Mill Sabin's crops, including turnips, potatoes, and oats. He has spent $9,000 in improving his farm. Sabin runs a livery barn in Fairbanks and has taken the profits and invested them in his farm. He has approximately 40 acres under cultivation, and it cost him from $35 to $40 per acre to clear the land.

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FIG. 10.—Farm of Magnus Nelson. At the time of my visit Mr. Nelson employed a hired man whom he was paying $4 per day and board. He did not have a very large area cultivated, but his hired man was putting up hay for him.

FIG. 11.—View of clearing on homestead of P. A. Nelson in sections 19 and 20, township 1 north, range 1 east, Fairbanks meridian. The clearing is inside of the rail fence shown in the picture. Nelson stated that he had three-fourths of an acre under cultivation and that the clearing and seeding of it cost him $150. He paid $30 for a team to plow and harrow the ground. He filed on his homestead in May, 1913, and lived there part of the time.

FIG. 12.—Homestead of John Bernstichs, section 18, township 1 north, range 1 east, Fairbanks meridian. He has lived on his homestead for five years. Note that all these pictures show that it is necessary to clear the ground of timber.

FIG. 13.—View from Birch Ridge showing Tanana Valley and Fairbanks. This is about 7 miles from Fairbanks, and the town can be seen from this point, although it is not visible in the picture. The immediate foreground shows the result of a fire. The timber has all been killed. This is the kind of ground that is farmed after the timber is cleared off.

FIG. 14.—View down the Tanana Valley from Ester Hill, about 8 miles from Fairbanks. Fairbanks can be seen from the hill, but the picture is not clear enough to show it. This also shows the result of a fire

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FIG. 15.—Government Experiment Station, about 5 miles from Fairbanks. Note the several kinds of small grain. The farm here is on a south slope. Note the thick growth of timber. The Experiment Station was paying $75 per acre for having ground similar to this cleared. The southern slopes are the most favorable for agriculture in the Tanana Valley.

FIG. 16.—Garden and barley patch of H. W. Mitchell, near Knik, Alaska. Mitchell has 2 acres under cultivation. He claims 320 acres, and he says it is all he can do to properly attend to that much ground. He raises nothing but garden vegetables. He receives 5 cents per pound for cabbages, beets, carrots, etc. He complains that the market in Knik is not always good, because the merchants do not always patronize him. They have not yet gotten into the habit of buying from the local farmers and are having their vegetables shipped in.

FIG. 17.—Homestead of C. B. White, near Knik, Alaska, in sections 23 and 24 and 25, township 16 north, range 3 west. White is one of the homesteaders who came in with the "rush" in the spring of 1914. The surroundings show his efforts at clearing.

FIG. 18.—Another view of the C. B. White homestead, with the homesteader in the foreground. He was slashing and burning timber at the time of my visit. He claims 320 acres, but had only one-half acre cleared at that time.

This shows the utter impracticability of homesteaders in Alaska who claim 320 acres complying with the homestead law as to cultivation. As a matter of fact, 80 acres is sufficient. They will do well if they can average from 5 to 10 acres in cultivation during the first four or five years on the homestead.

FIG. 15.—Government Experiment Station, about 5 miles from Fairbanks. Note the several kinds of small grain. The farm here is on a south slope. Note the thick growth of timber. The Experiment Station was paying 875 per acre for having ground similar to this cleared. The southern slopes are the most favorable for agriculture in the Tanana Valley.

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FIG. 19.—View on the road from Knik to the headwaters of the Little Susitna River, showing the character of the undergrowth and the muddy roads. These roads were in a frightful condition all last summer because of the heavy rains. This is the kind of land that is located by homesteaders in 320-acre tracts. A considerable portion of this area contains good soil, and when the trees and undergrowth are removed fairly good crops are raised, but it can readily be seen that it is impossible for a homesteader to cultivate a very large area.

FIG. 20.—Mile 16 Roadhouse, on the road from Knik to the head of the Susitna, or Willow Creek mining district. This is another view of scenes along that road. Note the thick growth of timber and underbrush.

Two women are running this roadhouse; it was started in the spring of 1914 and they also came in with the "rush." This is the halfway house between Knik and Mile 32, the end of the Government road, and the Willow Creek mining district. This place is usually reached by noon of the day that you leave Knik or Mile 32 and is the stopping place of most travelers going to the Willow Creek mining district and returning to Knik from there.

The road is also used in reaching the Matanuska coal field; by going from Knik to Mile 25 and then branching off in a northeasterly direction to the Matanuska field.

FIG. 21.—Another view on the road from Knik to the headwaters of the Little Susitna. I traveled for 30 miles through woods of this kind, shown in this picture and also in Fig. 19. This is part of the so-called Susitna Valley, concerning which so much has been said. The descriptions of the Susitna Valley by people who are interested in exploiting Alaska would lead one to believe that it is composed of wide plains such as are found in the States of Iowa and Illinois, but when one gets on the ground he finds conditions such as are shown in these pictures.

A homesteader will be unable to make a living upon his homestead in Alaska for some years to come. It is necessary for him to find employment elsewhere in order to secure money with which to buy his provisions. The success of a homesteader in Alaska depends upon the development of the mining industry, because it is to the miners he must sell his produce. If the railroad will open up the coal mines and other mineral property which has been laying idle, then the farmer will be able to secure a market for his produce, but it will be some time before a farmer in Alaska, and especially along the southern coast, is self-supporting.

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FIG. 22.—Another view on the road from Knik to the Willow Creek mining district. Antone Eide, one of the road overseers of the Alaska Road Commission, is in the foreground.

This picture was taken for the purpose of showing the result of a fire which had passed through the woods in this vicinity. The people in this section of the country believe it will be for the benefit of all concerned to have the thick growth of timber and underbrush destroyed by fire, and they frequently set fires for the deliberate purpose of clearing the country of the thick undergrowth. It helps to dry the roads and they believe it will be a benefit to the homesteader to have it all burned off. The timber, as a rule, is of a very poor quality and is composed mostly of birch and spruce. The birch is a hardwood and can be used for flooring and furniture, and many requests have been made for permission to export it from Alaska, and undoubtedly a bill will be introduced for the purpose of allowing such export. They argue that the timber is of no value other than for firewood in its present condition, and that if it will help mankind to have it exported from Alaska for the purpose of making furniture it should be done. Most of it will eventually be destroyed by fire, and there seems to be considerable weight in the argument to permit its export.

This is one of the matters that should be considered in the change of the public-land laws applicable to Alaska, and if the Alaska Development Board is created, as recommended by the Secretary, I have no doubt that they will conclude that the best way to handle this class of timber is to allow it to be exported, and thereby put it to the uses of mankind instead of having it destroyed by fire or allowing it to rot.

FIG. 23.—View of part of the headquarters camp of the Alaskan Engineering Commission, at Ship Creek, showing the cabin of Jeter, who located the land as a homestead. Note the thick growth of timber and underbrush. Most of the clearing in the foreground was done by the Alaskan Engineering Commission during the summer of 1914. The large house back of Jeter's cabin was built in 1906 and 1907 by Hitchkock and Weiremen, saloon keepers, with the intention of running a saloon and roadhouse. The other buildings shown were erected by the engineering commission.

FIG. 24.—Closer view of the Jeter cabin at Ship Creek, showing the thick growth of trees and underbrush. Mr. Jeter has claimed this land as a homestead since 1910, but at the time the engineering commission arrived in the spring of 1914 had less than 1 acre cleared and less than one-half acre under cultivation.

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FIG. 25.—French & Herron prospecting for placer gold on the A. Lawson homestead, near Sunrise, Alaska, on Turnagain Arm.

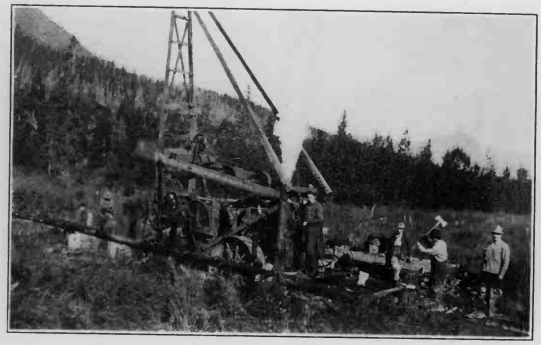

FIG. 26.—Closer view of French & Herron drilling on the A. Lawson homestead.

FIG. 27.—Panning for gold, gravel taken from the drill on the A. Lawson homestead. These views also show the thick underbrush and hardships incident to homesteading in Alaska.

FIG. 28.—Crossing the Tanana River at McCarthy, on the trail from Fairbanks to Chitina, during August, 1914.

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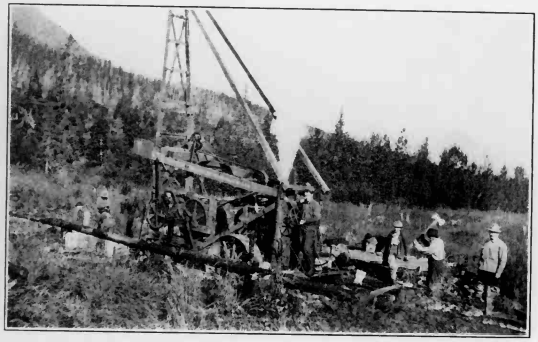

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FIG. 28.—Crossing the Tanana River at McCarthy, on the trail from Fairbanks to Chitina, during August, 1914.

FIG. 29.—A view along the Tanana River, showing the wide valley and how the river spreads in some places for 2 or 3 miles. The currents of the stream are ever changing; you never know where to find the main channel; it is continually cutting into the banks on both sides and spreading, leaving islands here and there.

Fairbanks, Alaska, is located on an island, on Chena Slough. The island is the result of the changing of the river.

FIG. 30.—A view on the Delta River, a tributary of the Tanana. The river is well named. Note how it is spread and how many channels there are.

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